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11 July 1979

DCI BACKUP BRIEFING NOTE

NIE TRACK RECORD

- I. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the NIEs significantly overestimated the existing and prospective size of the Soviet ICBM force. These overestimates were based in part on the pace and success of the Soviet ICBM development program and in part on projections of Soviet deployment capabilities made in the absence of hard evidence of actual deployment activity.
- II. In the mid- and late 1960s, the NIEs significantly underestimated the prospective size of the Soviet ICBM and SLBM forces. Even though by this time we had good knowledge of Soviet launcher construction and deployments as they occurred, we underestimated the prospective magnitude of the Soviet programs. The NIEs predicted that the Soviets would deploy either fewer, or later, only about the same number of ICBM launchers as the US. The estimators believed mistakenly that the Soviets would want to avoid triggering major new US programs, failed to appreciate the vigor of the Soviet reaction to the humiliation they suffered in the Cuban missile crisis, and overcompensated for the earlier errors of the "missile gap" era.
- III. The estimative record during the 1970s has been mixed. Insofar as can now be determined, many forecasts made in that period have been about right. These include the IOC dates predicted for MIRVed ICBMs and SLBMs. In addition, the NIEs seem to have correctly identified the main lines of

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development in Soviet strategic air defenses and correctly judged that Soviet ASW capabilities against SSBNs would remain low. There have also been some apparent overestimates. For example, we overestimated the rapidity with which the Soviets would convert older ICBM silos for the newer MIRVed systems, now being deployed and the rapidity with which a new SSBN and a new heavy bomber would be developed and deployed. However, in two important aspects of Soviet intercontinental striking capability-- the accuracy of Soviet ICBMs and the number of on-line Soviet missile RVs-- we now believe that in the past few years we were underestimating the progress the Soviets would make by the early 1980s. We believe that we have now corrected this error in our most recent estimate.

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- IV. As to the degree of confidence consumers should have in NIE forecasts in light of the estimative record, a number of considerations are relevant:
- A. Our present forecasts are based on the expectation that the USSR will continue to demonstrate broad scope, vigor, and persistence in its strategic programs. Concern about US reactions is no longer assumed to inhibit the Soviets' determination to improve their deterrent and war-fighting capabilities.
 - B. In general, our historical base and current information about on-going Soviet deployment programs is better than before, but we still have very little information about specific Soviet plans. Forecasts for the near term are likely to be more reliable than forecasts for the period 5-10 years hence.

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- C. When deployment programs are in mid-stream and their pace is well established, confident forecasts can extend some years into the future. Periods of change in Soviet deployment programs, however, can introduce substantial uncertainties about even the near term.

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- D. With respect to new weapons, long development leadtimes permit us to be reasonably confident that future Soviet strategic forces will consist very largely of types of weapons identified several years in advance.

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- F. Recognizing these limitations, our present estimative philosophy is to change our forecasts, even drastically, as soon as possible when the evidence leads us to believe we have detected a new development or trend, or that the Soviets have altered a program. This means we accept considerable fluctuations in forecasts from year to year in the interests of giving our consumers as much advance warning as possible.

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